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ABSTRACT

Although Willa Cather is known primarily for her short fiction and novels, she began her writing career as a literary and drama critic while still a student at the University of Nebraska. Her writing experience with the university literary periodical led her to become the drama critic for the "Nebraska State Journal," and later for the "Lincoln Courier." She was known as a vigorous, bitingly frank critic to the actors in the touring companies that played in Lincoln. But if Cather was frequently harsh, she also applauded excellence when she saw it. In 1896, Cather moved to Pittsburgh, where she continued as a critic for the next five years, occasionally traveling to New York and Washington to attend theater and opera performances. As a result of her personal contact with several actors, she decided to write a series of open letters offering advice to particular actors on how to approach their roles, an idea that was not well received by either the artists in question or the publishers she sought. Joining the staff of "McClure's Magazine" in New York led her to concentrate on fiction, but she continued to comment on theater and acting in her fictional works, notably in the "Song of the Lark" and "My Mortal Enemy." Her contributions to American theater are thus two-fold: her audacious criticism as a young woman, and her life-long appreciation that grew out of her keen perception from the audience. (NKA)

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Willa Cather as Drama Critic

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CATHER, Willa (Dec. 7, 1873--Apr. 24, 1947), author of criticism, poetry, short stories and novels, was born in Back Creek Valley, Virginia, and died in New York City. She was the eldest of seven children. Her parents were Charles and Mary Virginia (Boak) Cather. Her father was a gentleman sheep rancher and her mother came from a patrician southern background.

The family emigrated to Webster County, Nebraska, in April, 1883. Willa Cather graduated from Red Cloud High School and the University of Nebraska. Her adopted state became a major influence on both her artistic perceptions and her own choice of subject matter. Although she is primarily known for her short fiction and novels, Willa Cather began her writing career as a literary and drama critic.

Willa Cather's earliest intellectual and artistic abilities were influenced not only by her family, but also by numerous cultured Nebraskans. While conditions on the Nebraska frontier were often primitive, many of the pioneers themselves were not. Several years before entering college, Willa Cather was reading Latin and French through the encouragement of well educated neighbors in Red Cloud. Among the Bohemian, Russian, German, French, and Norwegian immigrants who populated the Red Cloud of Cather's youth were musicians, botanists, frustrated painters, and a dry goods merchant who kept a copy of The Iliad in Greek on his counter. Years later, Cather wrote in The Nation of the talents and character of the European immigrants and said "they brought with them something that this neutral new world needed even more than the immigrants needed land."

The railroad carried troupes of traveling actors to Red Cloud, and their performances at the local opera house inspired dramatic ambitions in young Willa Cather. In addition to school recitations and improvised plays with her friends, she became both an actress and director for community plays--including participation in a production of "Beauty and the Beast" to raise money for victims of

the blizzard of 1888. Later, Willa Cather did some acting at the University of Nebraska, and was praised for her portrayal of Lady Macbeth.

Her theatrical interests turned to criticism when she became acquainted with drama critics writing for Lincoln newspapers. Her experience as editor and contributor to the university literary periodical Hesperian led to her becoming the drama critic (at first unsigned) for the Nebraska State Journal in 1893, while still a student. Her style was distinctive enough that she became recognized as the foremost critic in the city. By 1895, she had developed a regular column of criticism and commentary entitled "The Passing Show." This column became her professional property and followed her when she wrote for the Lincoln Courier. The impact she made as a critic is reflected in an 1895 editorial comment by the Des Moines Record that "the best theatrical critics of the west are said to be connected with the Lincoln, Neb. press."

Willa Cather became known for her biting frankness, and she earned a national reputation among actors who toured through Lincoln. The vigor of her criticism was due in part to her youth and personality--but, in fact, the theatre which came to the midwest in the 1890's varied greatly in quality. Some mediocre actors were able to exchange tickets for flattery from newspaper critics. In contrast, Willa Cather set a standard of toughness and high expectations in her criticism. If she was frequently harsh, she also applauded excellence when she saw it. The two examples below indicate the style of Cather's early critical writing, and show her capacity for both scathing indictment and lavish praise.

In the following excerpt, she commented on the traveling production of Cleopatra, which starred Lillian Lewis--an actress with a national reputation, but little experience in Shakespearian roles. Cather wrote:

> I feel that I am not at all able to do justice to Lillian Lewis . . . I shall see her in my dreams, that coy, kittenish matron, bunched up on a moth-eaten tiger stroking Mark Antony's double chin. I never saw a less regal figure and carriage. I have seen waiters in restaurants who were

> ten times more queenly. Her movements were exactly like those of the women who give you Turkish baths in Chicago.
>
> Lincoln Courier, October 26, 1895

In the following excerpt, Cather paid tribute to the performance of Clara Morris in Camille.

> To commend, even to speak of the great work done on the Lansing stage last night seems almost presumption. . . . One may comment upon excellencies of average acting, but when we find a perfect individual creation, we accept it as unquestioning as we accept nature's work, and upon it we build a whole philosophy of art. To criticize the way in which Clara Morris dies in Camille would be as impertinent as to criticize any real death. One can only say of perfection that it is perfect; we have no adjectives which go any higher; we can only try to see what the great artist does with this creation of hers, and perhaps how she attains her perfection.
>
> Nebraska State Journal, November 23, 1893

Willa Cather moved to Pittsburgh in 1896, and during the next five years was successively editor of Home Monthly and a reporter for the Pittsburgh Daily Leader. At the Daily Leader, she wrote drama criticism in addition to other reporting assignments; and, from 1896 to 1901, continued to send drama criticism for publication in Lincoln newspapers. During this time, she traveled to New York and Washington--where she attended theatre and opera performances, and met personally some of the actors she had previously criticized at a distance. For one summer, she was a guest drama critic for the New York Sun.

As a result of her personal contacts with several actors (including Lizzie Hudson Collier) and the inside look at theatre which these friendships provided, Cather decided to write a series of open letters offering advice to particular actors on how to approach their roles. Several of these letters were published in Nebraska newspapers, and she planned to compile them into a book, tentatively entitled The Player Letters. But the instructional tone of the letters was not well received by the artists she addressed nor the publishers she sought. The book was never published, and Cather left full-time journalism in 1901 to become a teacher in the Pittsburgh school system. During the next year, she wrote a

few articles for the Pittsburgh Gazette, and sent travel commentaries to the Nebraska State Journal during three months in Europe. But her writing efforts increasingly turned to poetry and short fiction. In 1906, she joined the staff of McClure's Magazine in New York, and contributed short stories to that periodical. This led to her later concentration on short fiction and novels--for which she is now best known.

The end of her career as a critic did not end Cather's interest in the arts in general and theatre in particular. Her personal knowledge of the theatre was often reflected in her short stories and novels. Unlike the sharpness and dogmatism of some of her criticism, the references in her fiction were usually appreciative. Moreover, the allusions in her literature were less effusive, and reflected the thoughtfulness of a maturing writer.

As a precursor to later dramatic references, Cather described in the short story "Peter" (1892) Sara Bernhardt's performance of La Tosca in Omaha that same year. Cather described the thoughts of Peter:

> Once, a French woman came and played for weeks, but he did not remember her name now. He did not remember her face very well either, for it changed so, it was never twice the same. But the beauty of it, and the great hunger men felt at the sight of it, that he remembered. Most of all he remembered her voice. He did not know French, and could not understand a word she said, but it seemed to him that she must be talking the music of Chopin.

In "Paul's Case" (1905), Cather evoked the ambience she herself had felt when attending the theatre in Pittsburgh and becoming acquainted with Lizzie Hudson Collier. She wrote in this story: "It was at the theatre and at Carnegie Hall that Paul really lived; the rest was but a sleep and a forgetting."

In The Song of the Lark (1915), Cather remembered through her fictional Thea Kronborg the discipline and intensity of great artists, and her references drew from her own experience of seeing Olive Fremstad at the Metropolitan Opera years before.

In My Ántonia (1918), Jim Burden and Lena Lingard go to the theatre in Lincoln to see Clara Morris in Camille. Through the thoughts of Jim Burden, Cather echoed her earlier appraisal as a critic, but her language was now free of the hyperbole she had used twenty-five years before. Jim Burden reflects in part: [After leaving the theatre] "I tramped through the puddles and under the showery trees, mourning for Marguerite Gauthier as if she had died only yesterday, sighing with the spirit of 1840 . . . which had reached me only that night, across long years and several languages, through the person of an infirm old actress."

In My Mortal Enemy (1926), Cather revealed her own lasting admiration of Helena Modjeska--whom she had met in New York a quarter century before. Cather's protagonist in the novel uses her few hoarded coins to light candles to the memory of Madame Madjeska, and says of her: "It is a solace to me to know that tomorrow a mass will be said . . . for the spirit of that noble artist, that beautiful and gracious woman."

In "Two Friends" (1931), Cather created a story which recalled two men who had lived in Red Cloud forty years before. The two friends talk of seeing Edwin Booth in Richard II, and Cather remarks in the voice of the narrator: "It was an age of good acting, and the drama held a more dignified position in the world than it holds today."

Willa Cather's contributions to American theatre are thus two-fold: her audacious criticism as a young woman, and her life-long appreciation which grew out of her keen perception from the audience and her acquaintance with several notable stage artists at the turn of the century. Though her criticism is little known today, the continuing appeal of her fiction leads readers to discover her artistic perception. Her work is also a reminder of the frequent sophistication of actors and audiences in the pioneer midwest. She has contributed to both theatrical history and general American history through a body of work which refutes stereotypes of uncivilized frontier life.

Willa Cather died at the age of seventy-three, and is buried at Jaffrey, New Hampshire. Bernice Slote wrote of her: "Whatever she found of chaos is balanced by something achieved, something understood." As theatre critic and a Pulitzer Prize winning author, Cather offered an unusually incisive perception of both "chaos" and achievement.

[For biographical information, see: Mildred R. Bennett, The World of Willa Cather (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961); Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant, Willa Cather: A Memoir (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1963); Bernice Slote, Willa Cather: A Pictorial Memoir (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1973). For information on Cather as theatre critic, see: E. K. Brown and Leon Edel, Willa Cather: A Critical Biography (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964); William M. Curtin, The World and the Parish, 2 vols. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1970); Bernice Slote, The Kingdom of Art (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966).]

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